

Historicalthinkingmatters.org: Using the Web to Teach Historical Thinking

Daisy Martin, Sam Wineburg, Roy Rosenzweig, and Sharon Leon

On Constitution Day, September 17, 2002, the National Archives and Records Administration and its partners launched **OurDocuments.Gov**, a website that put the most important documents of American history into the hands of anyone with an Internet connection.

OurDocuments.Gov is only one drop in a vast sea of digital historical archives that has flooded the Internet. The Library of Congress's American Memory presents more than 8 million historical documents, including 61,000 pages from the Abraham Lincoln Papers, 341 early motion pictures and 81 disc sound recordings from the Edison Companies, and 160,000 photographs from the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection. Hundreds of millions of dollars in federal, foundation, and corporate funds—\$60 million just for American Memory—have gone into digitizing a startlingly large proportion of our national heritage.

What was once beyond imagination is now commonplace: a student sitting in his or her own home or classroom in Nome, Alaska, or Key West, Florida, can access a vast, dispersed “national archive.” Access to archives was once barred except to those with specialized credentials and training. Today, any novice can wander into a digitized wonderland, reviewing materials formerly kept under lock and key. The goal of making historical evidence

available to the masses has been met with incredible energy in the hope that students would have the experience of encountering history as historians do, rather than in predigested textbook narratives. But the corollary hope—that digitized material would be used to reenergize and transform history instruction—remains unfulfilled. We have democratized access to historical materials but not to the kind of instruction that would give meaning to these materials. Our classrooms now have an abundance of Internet connections and online historical documents. The question is, how can we use these resources to bring about significant educational improvement?

The Internet presents countless opportunities to transform history education.¹ Using it to teach history in the old familiar way where students pull and memorize information from sources with little if any analysis betrays that potential. Understanding history requires understanding the processes integral to constructing historical narratives—the ways that historians analyze and compare fragmented, sometimes contradictory

sources to create evidence-based narratives and conclusions. At the heart of these processes is reading—but reading informed by the ways of knowing in the discipline.

Yet, in many of our history and social studies classes the teaching of reading is mostly absent, as teachers manage multiple instructional goals and curricular topics. Social studies teachers need to respond to the sorry fact that too many of our students are reading below grade level and lack the skills needed to decipher and comprehend varied texts.² Additionally, students often view the written word, whether from a conventional textbook or a website yielded by a Google search, as undiluted truth.³ Asking questions about authors of historical accounts—their purposes, their audience, their choice of words, and the circumstances leading to the creation of their texts—is not a part of most young readers' routines. Conversely, their peers may take the opposite approach, viewing the written word as pure falsehood, standing ready to discard it without analyzing whether there is something to be learned from it. But historical texts, writ large, defy the simplistic categories of pristine or corrupt. They are human creations, and this means that readers must actively question them—to mine truth from falsehood and gain access

to worlds that have passed and that can never be fully retrieved.

Historical Thinking Matters

Historical Thinking Matters addresses the problem of an abundance of historical texts and a dearth of students able to read them with sophistication.⁴ We have developed web-based resources for teachers and students designed to democratize historical understanding and to develop core features of academic literacy. Our approach to teaching social studies places literacy at the core. Our materials focus on teaching students how to read historical documents critically and how to synthesize textual evidence into coherent narratives.

Historicalthinkingmatters.org is a collaboration between the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, the pioneers of online historical resources with its “History Matters” website, and Stanford University’s History Education group, a research center that investigates the teaching and learning of history. With funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, we aim to harness the web’s distributive power in order to make high quality instructional materials for teaching historical reading free and readily accessible to all.

To design and produce the features and content of this website, we drew on existing research and scholarship in American history and history education. Sam Wineburg’s work on how historians source, contextualize, and corroborate as they read historical sources provides a framework for our teaching and learning tools. The idea that to teach thinking, we must make thinking visible and explicit informed our design. Recent historical scholarship influenced our choice of topics and the resources we created. Finally, we have continually considered the realities of schooling. We anticipated that different teachers in vastly different contexts would visit our site, and so we tried to create resources that could be used flexibly and creatively.



Figure 1. Home Page

Why Historical Thinking Matters: A Movie Introduction to the Site

If you go to our home page (historicalthinkingmatters.org/) you will find three major sections that provide access to our digital materials: student investigations; teacher materials and strategies; and “why historical thinking matters”—an introduction to the site’s approach.

Start with this introduction to watch a movie using Adobe Flash. The movie uses a case study that probes the opening hostilities in the Revolutionary War to show why historical reading is at the heart of the discipline. It tries to explain in everyday language a range of historical reading strategies, showing what they look like in practice. This movie not only serves as an introduction to the reading strategies taught on the site (sourcing, contextualizing, close reading and corroborating), but can also stand alone as an instructional tool.

Student Investigations

Student investigations are at the heart of our site. We currently have four inquiries: the Spanish-American War, Scopes Trial and the 1920s, the Social Security Act and New Deal, and Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Each poses a central question—such as, Why did the U.S. invade Cuba in 1898? Or, How was the Scopes trial more complicated than a simple debate between evolutionists and creationists?—and then directs students to work through a set of sources preparing them to craft an essay addressing this central question.

When you select the Spanish-American War graphic on the home page, you are directed to the module’s introduction. Here students view a two-minute movie that sets up the inquiry, providing context and introducing the question that students will investigate. On this page, students can also view a timeline and check what pages in their textbooks address the topic.⁵ The warm-up activity engages students in a “mini-inquiry.” Students examine two contrasting news reports of the sinking of the USS *Maine*, one from Hearst’s *New York Journal and Advertiser*, the other from *The New York Times*, and consider which account is more believable. This activity serves as preface to the larger inquiry or can stand alone. The main inquiry is built around seven sources: a patriotic song from the time, McKinley’s War Speech, telegrams from Cuba, the Monroe Doctrine, a political cartoon, and a campaign speech by Albert J. Beveridge. Some or all of these documents will be familiar to many teachers; what may be novel are the reading and analysis supports that accompany the documents, and the interactive notebook where students can keep a record of their analyses.

Interactive Notebook

Programmed to provide an interactive interface (see Figure 2), the notebook includes a space where students can read the primary sources, review additional resource materials, and answer guided questions, typing their notes on the screen. The left pane of the notebook



Figure 2. The Interactive Notebook

displays the primary sources. The right pane includes two tabs, one of which gives students access to additional resources (vocabulary, supplemental images, additional context from a historian, and historian think-alouds) to help them decipher and understand the source.

The other tab allows students to access the guiding questions for each document. After logging in, they can type and save their answers in the notebook so that they can access that material when they compose their essays during the assignment portion of the investigation. As students work to answer the guiding questions, they can select the “Give me a hint” button, which produces a marked-up version of the source. The markup consists of highlighted sections of the text and helpful annotations. Together these features provide a variety of levels of scaffolding so that students have the help and support that they need to read and analyze sources effectively. All of this material is available to students as they work to complete the assessment. Finally, students have the opportunity to email their work directly to their teachers.

Students like the interactivity of the notebook. Teachers appreciate that the notebook allows students to work at their own pace and self-monitor the help they need.

Supporting Readers

The scaffolds that we include are all intended to support our ultimate purposes: apprenticing students into the ways

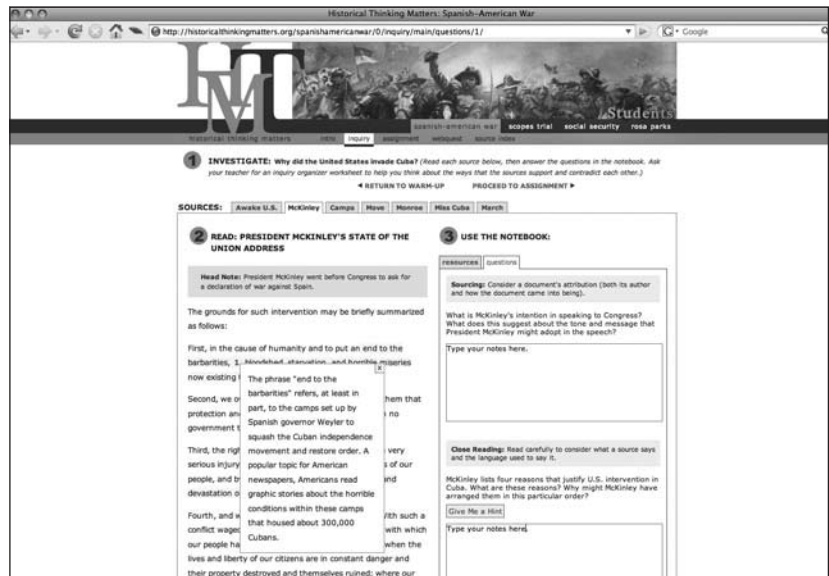


Figure 3. Annotated Text

of reading and thinking that historical work requires, and preparing them to become more skilled users of the digital archives. But this is not an easy task and we approach the scaffolds from multiple angles. The documents that students read have been carefully prepared (see Figure 3). They have been edited for length and relevance to the inquiry question, and each has an easy to find attribution and a head note that includes orienting information. Students could find the full Beveridge speech online, but its length and density would intimidate most. Additionally, the language used in original sources can intimidate as well, so we include vocabulary aids. Annotations that appear when the student selects “Give me a hint” use rollovers to focus attention on particular phrases and types of language (e.g.,

charged adjectives and loaded verbs).

We harness the multimedia potential of the web with two particular supports: historian audio commentaries and video think-alouds. With one click, students can select an audio commentary and hear a historian provide specific background information to help them understand the source. For example, a student can read a song written on April 25, 1898, and then hear a historian discuss the role of sheet music in the nineteenth century.

The video think-alouds capture historians in the act of reading the document, usually for the very first time. These 45-

to 90-second clips show the processes of sophisticated reading (i.e., what goes on in the head of an expert reader who routinely analyzes historical sources).⁶ The accompanying audio commentary identifies and explains the reading strategy on view in the video. These two components, the video think-aloud and audio commentary, work together to make historical reading processes visible and explicit for the student.

The questions that students answer for each document also serve this purpose. Each question is identified as a sourcing, contextualizing, corroborating, or close reading question. The consistency of this frame and the multiple examples of each kind of question give students practice with ways of reading that may initially seem strange.

All of these reading supports (including vocabulary aids, providing additional background information, and making reading strategies visible), coupled with rich texts, are the kind of help students need to become better readers—readers who not only know how to decode and comprehend, but also how to learn from their reading and question texts. While some might suggest that teachers should wait to introduce high school students to questioning and analyzing text until they can read at grade level, we disagree. Becoming a sophisticated reader is not necessarily a smooth, unbroken path, and adolescents are ready to learn multiple aspects of reading in tandem. One thing our site offers is concrete examples of content—specific reading supports. And by providing them with this careful scaffolding on a modest document set, we believe students will be better able to master the historical reading strategies necessary for working in the uncontrolled environment of the web.

Teacher Materials and Strategies

The teacher sites for each unit include several resources to help teachers plan and teach document-based historical reasoning using the materials available on the student site. Our goal was to design a site that would be useful for teachers who work with a range of students and in a variety of local school contexts. Obviously, this meant that we could not assume that teachers had access to a set of class computers where students could use the interactive notebook to work through the inquiry. In this teacher section, educators can find the same core materials to use off-line in their classrooms (see Figure 4).

But that is not all that is included here. From the home page, if you click on “teacher materials and strategies” and then select “Spanish-American War,” you will land on the teacher’s introduction to the module. This introduction explains that the module engages students in analyzing and understanding historical cause while identifying some common student misconceptions regarding causation. For each of the modules, this introduc-

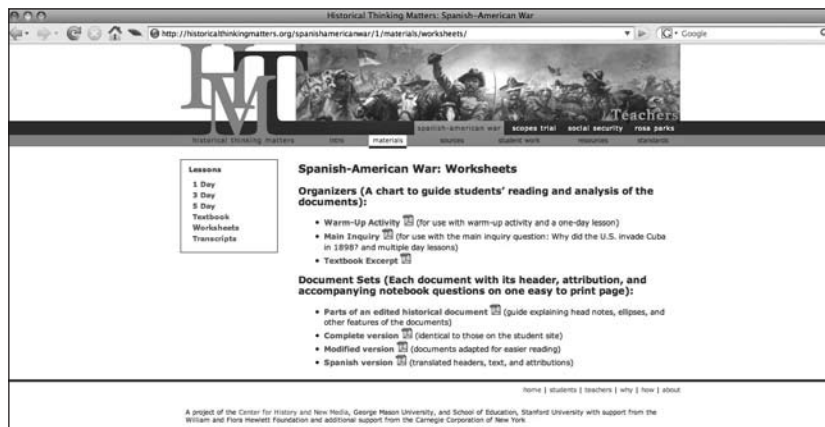


Figure 4. Teacher Materials for Downloading

tion specifies a way of thinking central to history addressed in the particular inquiry. Additional framing information for each module is also available in this teacher section, including a selection of state standards addressing the inquiry’s topic and an annotated bibliography of relevant websites.

Lessons and Worksheets

The “materials” section uncovers a mother lode of resources. These include four different lesson plans: a one-, three-, and five-day lesson, and a “textbook” lesson that starts with a textbook account and then requires that students compare that account with additional source materials. Here you also find “worksheets”; these include graphic organizers for the warm-up and main inquiry, and PDFs of the document sets. You can choose to download a set that includes all the documents as they appear on the student site, or one of two other options. The modified set contains the same documents that have been further adapted for struggling readers. The Spanish set includes all the documents translated into Spanish. Additionally, the “sources” section allows you to access the full text of each document so you or your students can review our editing decisions.

Student Thinking

Additionally, on the teacher site for each investigation, we include four samples of student work, two video think-alouds of students and two excerpts from students’ essays. These samples are accompanied by written commentaries that explain the

specific historical reading and thinking processes visible (or not) in each artifact. Combined with the historian think-alouds available on the student platform, these add up to a small trove of examples of historical reading that show multiple points along an expert-novice continuum. Historical reading and thinking is entering many history teachers’ lexicons, and these artifacts provide a clear picture of what these processes look like in practice.

We provide other resources too: we haven’t even mentioned the webquest or teacher educator page. Our hope is that every American history teacher can find something of use on our site, whether it be a weeklong lesson, a single document, or several ideas about how to introduce students to interrogating sources. Our site serves as a resource for ways of thinking about history instruction, learning more about historical reading and thinking, and classroom-ready materials. In this way, we seek to harness the power of the web to democratize access to powerful history instruction. 🌐

Notes

1. There are a growing number of websites designed to support teaching history in non-routine ways so teachers can focus on teaching history as analysis and investigation rather than mere memorization. For two early examples, see the Canadian site, “Who Killed William Robinson,” at web.uvic.ca/history-robinson, or the “Making Sense of Evidence” feature at historymatters.gmu.edu/browse/makesense/. For more recent examples, see the Digital History Reader at www.dhr.history.vt.edu/ or the World History curricular materials at worldhistoryforall.sdsu.edu/dev/shared/units.htm.
2. The 2005 results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for reading showed that in places like Cleveland, Atlanta, Los Angeles,

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education. Much of the online journal's content is now free. I also enjoy their free weekly and monthly newsletters.

American Memory (Library of Congress)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/>

This website provides some of best resources, and recommendations for usage, of any of the websites on my Favorites list.

Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/

I wrote about this site last month. If you haven't tried it, please do so.

Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

www.mcrel.org/standards/

I think this is the best site related to national and state standards and has some wonderful research reports on effective teaching methods. I use it all the time.

Awesome Library

www.awesomelibrary.org/

This site provides 35,000 lesson plans and links to resources for all subject areas. The plans and resources have been carefully selected and represent the best in each field.

These are some of the sites that I view and recommend frequently. Send me some of the sites that you think should be on every teacher's Favorites list. I'll review them, and sometime in the future, I'll write a column featuring your recommendations. 📧

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and the District of Columbia, more than half of the eighth graders tested failed to reach even the basic level on the NAEP. Only 35 percent of twelfth graders reached the proficient level, down from 40 percent in 1992. See nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/ for complete data.

3. Robert B. Bain, "They Thought the World Was Flat?": Applying the Principles of How People Learn in Teaching High School History," in *How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom*, eds. John Bransford and Suzanne Donovan (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2005), 179-213; Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 2001).
4. Primary investigators on historicalthinkingmatters.org/ are Professors Sam Wineburg at Stanford University and Roy Rosenzweig at George Mason University's Center for History and New Media. Thanks go to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for their support of this project and for additional support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Important contributions to the site's development and production were made by Brad Fogo, Daisy Martin, Chauncey Monte-Sano, Julie Park, and Avishag Reisman at Stanford University and Jeremy Boggs, Josh Greenberg, Stephanie Hurter, Sharon Leon, and Mike O'Malley at George Mason University.
5. Four of the best-selling textbooks are represented here as well as a fifth that is prepared primarily for the California market.
6. On the intermediate processes of historical reading, see Wineburg, 2001, especially Chapter 3.

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We deeply mourn the death of our collaborator, Roy Rosenzweig.

See thanksroy.org/about.

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In order to help develop good collaborative skills, groups are allowed to decide how they want to proceed with the analysis of sources and re-construction of the text (this may be more structured, based on individual classes). Some groups decide to split up the sources and then come back together as a group to do the synthesis, while others prefer to work together for the duration of the project. How students choose to proceed may be limited either by the number of computers that the group can access or by how the teacher chooses to structure the work. Ideally, each group would have access to a computer. If there is only one computer, groups could be rotated as part of a stations activity or collaborate on incorporating different sources into one common classroom textbook account.

As the groups read the sources, the teacher goes from group to group encouraging the students to contextualize the sources and to compare the differing accounts with one another and with the textbook account. It is also important to provide time reminders so that students do not become too enthralled in one particular source. These kinds of "soft scaffolding" are essential to the success of the exercise.¹⁴ The most powerful aspects of critical thinking and inquiry occur while students discuss the sources within their groups and compare them to the textbook account.

As students work their way through the sources, they need to decide what should be included in their revised text and often which sources should be trusted most. This kind of discussion within groups should be encouraged or introduced by the teacher since